Improving Your Serve - Defrosting Your Spiritual Assets

A man from Newcastle City Centre decided to travel to North Northumberland to go rabbit hunting. He shot and dropped a rabbit, but it fell into a farmer’s field on the other side of the fence. As the city guy climbed over the fence, a dairy farmer drove up on his tractor and asked what was going on. The hunter said, “I shot a rabbit and I’m retrieving it.” The old farmer replied, “This is my property and you’re not coming over here!”

Well, this made the hunter mad so he said, “If you don’t let me come over the fence I’ll call my city lawyer and I’ll sue you.” The farmer smiled and said, “Apparently you don’t know how we do things up here. We settle disagreements with the Northumbrian three-kick rule. I’ll kick you three times, and then you kick me three times, and so on, back and forth, until someone gives up.”

The city guy liked this challenge because he thought he could easily take the old farmer. The old farmer climbed down from the tractor and planted the steel toe of his heavy work boot into the man’s shin. The man fell to his knees. His second kick went directly to his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. The farmer than landed his third kick to the side of the hunter’s head. The disoriented man slowly got up and said, “Okay, you old codger, now it’s my turn!” To which the farmer responded, “Nah, I give up. You can have the rabbit.”

Many of us battle over things as well. Sometimes we fight because of a lack of information and other times we kick people simply because we want to. Most of us default to our selfish settings instead of looking for ways to put others first. Some time ago I talked about checking our motives, preparing for problems, putting the needs of others first, and following the example of Christ. I have always said that we must surrender our bodies, minds, and wills to God and have a proper estimate of ourselves before we can effectively serve.

The whole topic of spiritual gifts has been a battleground for many years, going back to the church at Corinth. This tension can result from an overemphasis on certain gifts, or it can come because we like to pick fights with those who are wired differently than we are.

Before we jump into our text in 1 Corinthians 12, let’s set the context. The Corinthian church was beset with many problems and difficulties. The church was filled with division, arguments, lawsuits, and immorality. On top of that, there was confusion about marriage, food sacrificed to idols, worship, the Lord’s Supper, the Resurrection, giving, and spiritual gifts. In particular, some people thought they were more important than others because they had some pretty spectacular gifts. When Paul wrote this letter to the church he specifically addressed these issues.

Chapter 12 gives us six directives to help us defrost our spiritual assets.

1 ­ Be Informed About Spiritual Gifts

When we read Corinthians 1:14 we see that Paul wanted to make sure that they had a proper understanding about spiritual gifts. The church at Corinth desperately needed instruction on this topic, and so do we. Notice verse 1 of chapter 12: “Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.” This is a topic that is too important for believers to be uninformed about and it’s certainly too critical to fight about. John MacArthur writes, “No local congregation will be what it should be…until it understands spiritual gifts”

Definition. Let’s begin by defining what a spiritual gift is. One of the best definitions I’ve come across is this: “Spiritual gifts are divine abilities distributed by the Holy Spirit to every believer according to God’s design and grace for the common good of the body of Christ”

Difference between spiritual gifts and natural abilities.

It’s important to recognize that a spiritual gift is given by the Holy Spirit at conversion, whereas a natural talent is something we’re born with. While we must yield our talents and abilities to the Lord’s work, we must pay particular attention to unleashing our spiritual gifts for the good of the body of Christ.

Difference between spiritual gifts and the fruit of the Spirit. Both the fruit of the Spirit Galatians 5:22-23 and spiritual gifts are necessary for a life of servanthood, but they make very different contributions.

Distinct categories. While there are many ways to categorize the gifts of the Sprit, I like the one suggested by Chuck Swindoll. He sees three gift groupings. Based on 1 Peter 4:11 there are two primary areas of distinction: speaking and serving. The third category would include the “sign gifts,” which are more temporary in nature. 2 Corinthians 2 :12 says that these gifts were given to the apostles and were critical to the church in its embryonic stage: “The things that mark an apostle-signs, wonders and miracles-were done among you with great perseverance.”

- Speaking Gifts: Word of wisdom, prophecy, evangelism, pastor-teacher, and teaching

- Service Gifts: Administration, exhortation, faith, giving, helps, serving, and mercy

- Sign Gifts: Distinguishing of spirits, miracles, healings, tongues, interpretation

Description of Gifts. If you were to add up all the distinct spiritual gifts, you’d come up with about 20. Since each of the lists does not appear to be exhaustive, there may even be more. These gifts are found in four books of the New Testament: 1 Peter 4, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians 12 and Galatians 5

Distribution of Gifts. As we study this topic of spiritual gifts, it’s important to keep in mind that we’re commanded to do much of the things that are also listed as spiritual gifts. For instance, while some people have the gift of giving, all of us are to be givers of our resources to kingdom purposes. Likewise, we aren’t excused from our responsibility to witness just because we might not have the gift of evangelism.

2. Be Influenced by the Holy Spirit

In verses 2-3, Paul challenges us to be influenced exclusively by the Holy Spirit: “You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” When we come to the topic of spiritual gifts, our focus must be on the Giver, not on the gifts themselves. Unfortunately, the Holy Spirit is often neglected in many churches today. Paul reminds us that before we were saved we were led astray by our emotions and false doctrines. Now that we are believers, the Holy Spirit empowers and energizes us for ministry.

Just as no one can confess the Lordship of Christ apart from the Spirit’s leading, so too, it is impossible to improve your serve without being led by the Spirit. Galatians 5:25 says : “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit blows like the wind through surrendered lives. We experienced an amazing demonstration of the Spirit’s influence many times in this church. Our corporate worship time was spontaneously sweet and the response to the Spirit’s prompting is incredible. God is doing a work here! John 3:8 says : “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Let’s continue to allow Him to move us into worship and the work of ministry.

3. ­ Incorporate Diversity in your Understanding

Paul next challenges us to incorporate diversity in our understanding of spiritual gifts in verses 4-6: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.” I want you to notice that the Trinity is involved with the giving of gifts: the Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and God the Father. While teaching about the Trinity is not the main point of this passage, these verses help us see how the entire Godhead is involved in the giving of gifts.

The key word in this passage is the word “different.” We all have different kinds of gifts, there are different ways to serve, and there are different workings. There’s not just one gift that fits all believers. The word “gifts” comes from the Greek, “charismata,” which is the root for the word “grace.” Grace gifts are those divine abilities distributed by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of “service.” This word speaks of opportunities for expressing our spiritual gifts in practical ways. The word “working” refers to the results or accomplishments that come when we use our gifts in meaningful service. Whether or not we are able to see the results, God does. We get the word “energy” from this Greek word. When we serve according to our giftedness, God gives us energy and we in turn energize the church through our service.

Philippians 2:13 reminds us: “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Because God is at work within us, we can accomplish His purposes. The Corinthians had elevated the more spectacular gifts and were giving more attention to the spiritual superstars. Paul challenges them, and us, to incorporate diversity in our understanding. We minister differently because we’ve been gifted differently. The same God is at work in us, but He customizes His work through us for His ultimate glory and the strength of the church.

Let me illustrate. Just suppose someone dropped a plate full of cakes up the newly painted walls of the school room. This is how people with different gifts would respond.

· Gift of prophecy That’s what happens when you’re not careful.”

· Gift of service Oh, let me help you clean it up.”

· Gift of teaching The reason that it fell was because it was too heavy on one side.”

· Gift of exhortation Next time, maybe you should let someone else carry it.”

· Gift of giving “Here, you can have my dessert.”

· Gift of mercy “Don’t feel too bad. It could have happened to anyone.”

· Gift of administration “Lindsey would you get the mop? Sue, please help pick this up. Mal, could you get him another dessert?”

We’ve all been gifted differently and so we act differently and we serve differently. Friends, this church has every gift that is needed in order to function as a biblical community. 1 Corinthians 1 7 says: “Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.”

This verse is written to the entire church at Corinth. Even with all its problems, this community of faith did not lack any spiritual gift. Likewise, WOL has just the right amount of spiritual gifts! It makes me wonder what needs God is going to meet by placing you in this church!

I’d love to lose the clergy/laity distinction that is way too common in churches today. We’re all ministers and priests according to 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” I might be the pastor but the priesthood is for all believers. In fact, our job, according to Ephesians 4:12 is “To prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”

With a full ministry schedule, there is no way that Lindsey and I can be at every single function, or be actively involved in all the ministries at WOL. Here’s an exciting truth. You have permission to minister in this church! In fact, you are saved in order to serve.

Lindsey and I will gladly serve in our area of giftedness and responsibility if you will serve in yours. Can we shake on it?

4 ­ Identify Your Spiritual Gift

We’re to be informed about spiritual gifts, be influenced by the Holy Spirit, and incorporate diversity in our understanding. Next, we’re to identify our spiritual gifts. Look at verse 7: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” The word “manifest” means to make plain. Spiritual gifts are given to make plain the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This verse teaches us two things. First, every born again believer has been given the manifestation of the Spirit. Notice the phrase, “each one.” Every Christian has been given at least one spiritual gift. 1 Corinthians 7:7 makes the same point: “I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.”

Second, we’ve been given at least one spiritual gift for the “common good,” or profit of the church. Ephesians 4:16 says : “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Gifts are given so that they can be given in service to others so that the church will be fortified. Remember that gifts are received, not achieved. The gifts of grace are given to you so that as each part does its work, the church can be built up. 1 Corinthians 12:11 tells us that the Spirit “gives to each one, just as He determines.”

If you need some help in figuring out your spiritual gift, you could ask to meet with us to pray as to what your spiritual gifts are. That’s what we are here for!

We can talk about the different gift lists in the New Testament and then pray over you. The Holy Spirit will lead you because He is the one who gave you your gifts in the first place.

5 - Implement Your Gift in Service

While it’s important to identify your gifts, it’s not enough. Gifts are given to be used. Verses 12-30 describe how the church is like the human body, with each part playing a critical role in the functioning of the body. You’ve been given gifts and a key role to play in this church. Until each of us implement our gifts, our church will not mature in faith. Look at verse 14: “Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.” The foot needs the hand, and the ear needs the eye. Likewise, we all need each other. If you’re hoarding your gifts and not using them, the entire body is handicapped.

The church at Corinth had elevated some of the sign gifts and had relegated the “lesser” gifts to second-class status. If Paul were to write a letter to us today, he would say something like this: “Brothers and sisters, say one of you owned a set of tools. Would you spend all your time counting them, naming them, organizing them, polishing them, and putting them on display? Would you not simply use them? So it is with the gifts of the Spirit: they are tools not to admire, but to use. They are not medals to be won, or trophies to be displayed, or treasures to be guarded. Use them! It is as you serve that God by His spirit will reveal the gifts He has given you”.

1 Peter 4:10 “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” Paul’s concern for young Timothy was that he not only be able to identify his gift, but that he would implement it: “Do not neglect your gift…I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God” 1 Timothy 4:14 says “ Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the eldership.

2 Timothy 1:6 says “Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

Do you need to allow the Spirit to fan your gift into full flame? Are you burning bright for Him, or are you just flickering or smoldering?

A well-known conductor was holding a rehearsal one night with a vast array of musicians and a hundred-voice choir. While the mighty chorus sang out, the horns blared and the cymbals clashed. Sitting far back in the orchestra, the piccolo player thought to herself, “With all these loud instruments, it doesn’t matter what I do. They don’t need me.” And so she stopped playing. Suddenly the conductor stopped the music and looked right at the piccolo player and said, “It doesn’t sound right without you. If you don’t play, the concert’s off. We need you.”

You’re needed in this church! God has gifted you and now He wants to use you. Don’t allow yourself to think you don’t matter. Nobody is a nobody in the body of Christ. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

6 ­ Intensify Your Love

One of the lessons we can learn from the church at Corinth is this: having spiritual gifts does not necessarily make you spiritual. It’s possible for a church to have all the gifts that are needed, and for every believer to know what their gift is, and still miss the mark. In the last verse of 1 Corinthians 12, we’re reminded that there is something far greater than even our divine abilities: “But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.”

While 1 Corinthians 13 is without doubt the best explanation of love ever written, we do a disservice to Paul’s intention when we only read it at weddings. This love chapter is sandwiched between a discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter 12 and chapter 14. Paul recognizes the dangers of defrosting our spiritual assets when they are divorced from love.

Notice the gifts that are listed in verses 1-3: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

After elevating the supremacy of love over every spiritual gift, Paul then describes how love should be the marinade that provides the distinctive flavor in our serving: “Love is patient, love is kind…” Then, beginning in verse 8, Paul contrasts the cessation of prophecies, tongues and knowledge with the never-failing aspect of love. Love will never fail or cease to exist.

I believe that ignorance related to spiritual gifts is not our basic problem. More basic is the problem of not desiring to strengthen other people’s faith by being patient and kind, by refusing to boast, by not being easily angered and by keeping no record of wrongs (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-6)

Human nature is more prone to tear down, than it is to build up. We’d rather kick people than labour in love with them and for them. Jonathon Swift once said, “We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.”

According to verse 7, a servant who loves “always protects, always trust, always hopes, and always perseveres.” In other words, as we focus on living out the Great Commandment by intensifying our love for God and for others, then we will want to look for ways to defrost our spiritual assets and serve others. Spiritual gifts, no matter how exciting and wonderful, are useless and even destructive if they are not unleashed in love.

Summary

Let’s summarize the six directives that will help us defrost our spiritual assets:

Be informed about spiritual gifts

Be influenced by the Holy Spirit

Incorporate diversity in your understanding

Identify your spiritual gift

Implement your gift in service

Intensify your love

What’s In Your Gift Box?

I’m thankful for the different gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to me.

Shepherding. I’m called first to be the pastor of my family and secondly to be the pastor of this church.

Evangelism. Build relationships, Look for opportunities, and take non-Christians to outreach events. I try to follow this same formula today as I remember that the clock is “ticking” for people.

Encouragement. I try to help people see Jesus when they look in the mirror, and strive to encourage and build them up with a word of encouragement.

Preaching/Teaching. I long to stay in close communion with Christ so that I can hear from Him while I’m preparing to preach and feed this church, I do this through getting up at 6 for my own devotional time before I begin working each day.

Service. “Before you can experience the glory, you must first be willing to suffer.” I heard someone say recently that we really shouldn’t look to serve according to our giftedness, but we should serve out of our brokenness. When we’re broken, we minister out of gratitude and dependence. If we serve only out of our giftedness, we may become filled with pride.

What’s in your gift box? Open it and use what you’ve been given. Is it time for you to think outside the box? Allow the Holy Spirit to blow into your life and lead you into some exciting serving opportunities!